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ABSTRACT

The history and development of research on Esperanto, a language created for universal communication, are reviewed. Discussion begins with the early context and intellectual tradition of efforts to create a universal language and proceeds to the creation of an Esperanto community and the context in which it operates currently. Expansion of the field is chronicled, focusing on two factors: growing academic respectability and interest in Esperanto as a means or a model for machine translation. Growth in the creation of basic Esperanto tools is also examined. Distribution of interest throughout the world is noted. It is concluded that ignorance of the scope and possibilities of Esperanto has hindered progress of the Esperanto movement. Contains seven pages of references. (MSE)

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Esperanto Studies: An Overview

Humphrey Tonkin and
Mark Fettes

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ESPERANTO STUDIES: AN OVERVIEW

Humphrey Tonkin and Mark Fettes[1]

1. The context of Esperanto studies

Arguably, the field of Esperanto studies is older than Esperanto itself. The Italian semiologist Umberto Eco, in *La ricerca della lingua perfetta* (1993), has situated Esperanto in the context of a long Western tradition of language creation, originating in the search for the Adamic tongue (cf. Fraser 1977, Olender 1992). Eco and others (see his bibliography) have in effect redefined and reinterpreted much of the history of linguistics in this way. Such an account sheds new light on the hundreds of projects for a worldwide, or universal, means of linguistic communication, which have been created over the years in an effort to overcome language differences.

The study of these projects, and the establishment of principles for the creation of planned languages, is generally known as interlinguistics, a term invented by Jules Meysmans in 1911, and given its current meaning by Otto Jespersen (Kuznecov 1989; Schubert 1989c). Early scholars, like Couturat and Leau (1907a; 1907b), were content to compare projects as linguistic artifacts, a tradition which retains some influence today. However, more recent authors have placed greater stress on the intellectual and social context of planned languages as well as their structures (Large 1985, Strasser 1988, Albani and Buonarotti 1994). Particular significance has been attributed to the role of extralinguistic factors in the formation of a

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speech community (D. Blanke 1985).

The Esperanto scholar is thus increasingly required to be familiar with a broad intellectual tradition which draws insights from pure and applied linguistics, psychology, sociology and many other fields. In the case of L.L. Zamenhof, the originator of Esperanto, such a broader approach is essential. Esperanto was a product of a particular moment in the intellectual history of northeastern Europe, a product also of a particular moment in the development of liberal Jewish thought in that region (Maimon 1978; Gold 1987). Zamenhof's approach to the idea of an international language was surely filtered in some measure through the Jewish experience. It was also the product of a particular moment in the history of technology, and of economic history, when a new class of teachers, bureaucrats and minor business people was emerging, with the resources and the time to travel, and, of course, the technological means at their disposal. It is equally important to recognize that by 1887, when Zamenhof brought out his first textbook, he had spent ten years or more in sustained creative experimentation (for an attempted reconstruction of this process, see Mattos 1987a).

Yet this booklet offered not a complete language but the basis of a language – what Zamenhof called the *Fundamento*. Subsequent years were to see its gradual evolution into a complete linguistic system. This *Fundamento* and Zamenhof's comments on it give as complete a picture of Zamenhof's views on language as we have (Zamenhof [1905] 1991a; Zamenhof [1927] 1990a). These views were in many respects revolutionary: they were not based solely on Zamenhof's observations of European languages, but anticipated the structuralism of Ferdinand de Saussure, whose brother René played an important part in the development of the theoretical principles of Esperanto and began, with his 1910 study, the exploration of word formation in Esperanto (Schubert 1989b).

As interesting as what Zamenhof put into his language project was what he chose to leave out: he understood very clearly that a language must be allowed to grow and develop, not only because too much rigidity may limit the adaptability of the language to changing needs, but also because participation in the processes of language change gives the speaker an intellectual and emotional investment in the language. All language projects, if they move beyond the author's desk, must confront the problem of ownership: if they are owned by the author they cannot survive; if they are the common property of a collective, there is some hope of survival and growth (Lo Jacomo 1981). Most authors are loath to part with their

creations: they are constantly adding to their projects, or seeking to produce ever larger dictionaries. Zamenhof saw very clearly that he must renounce ownership, must strive to create patterns of language loyalty, of shared ownership, leading to the creation of a language community.

2. Endogeny and exogeny of a second-language collective

We cannot separate the language itself from the speakers and users of the language: in a sense the two are one and the same. Rightly understood, Zamenhof's was not a language project pure and simple, but rather a blueprint for a new movement for international communication (or, to put it another way, for universal bilingualism). Hence the province of Esperanto studies must be expanded to include what might be described as the endogeny of the Esperanto language community: the characteristics of that community, its extent, its history, its products. Much basic data is brought together in Lapenna, Lins and Carlevaro (1974). Forster's sociological approach to the language and its adherents (1982) has been complemented by a number of shorter studies (Wood 1979; Jordan 1987; Piron 1989); a wider sociological review is in press (Rašić, 1995). Other perspectives are available through the study of Esperanto's literary development, dating back to the earliest works in the language. A strong critical tradition has yet to emerge, although the work of Auld (1978) and Waringhien (1983, 1989), particularly, is of high quality. Too much of this criticism – as is true in several other fields – is essentially internal to the tradition: it does not set Esperanto literature in a larger European or worldwide context, even though all Esperanto writers clearly bring a bicultural or multicultural viewpoint to their work. Both Auld and Waringhien have pointed to the potential value of Esperanto to the comparatist (Auld 1976; Waringhien 1987a), but their call for a comparative approach to the literature has yet to be taken up in earnest. If we consider that translated literature, particularly in the early years of the language, has played an important role in the development of literature in Esperanto, this lack of a broad perspective can only be regarded as a major shortcoming.

Such considerations quickly show that the endogeny of Esperanto cannot be properly studied without consideration of its exogeny – the context in which it developed and in which it operates today. We have already referred to Zamenhof's roots in a particular ethnic and historical tradition; similar factors have continued to shape the development of the language. The

persecution of Esperantists by dictatorial regimes – an experience which has deeply marked the community's image of itself – has been admirably researched and described by Ulrich Lins (1988), with a mine of new material now being uncovered by Nikolai Stepanov (1990, 1991) and other Russian researchers. The growth and decline of the labor movement (Noltenius et al. 1993) and the emergence of international organizations also played important parts in the movement's development. No history of human contacts during the Cold War should ignore the role of Esperanto, though that history has still to be written.

This last observation reminds us that in effect Esperanto studies must face in two directions: on the one hand it is important to study the phenomenon of Esperanto itself, to understand its development and present condition; on the other hand it is important to make sure that it is not ignored by scholars working in neighboring fields. Most literary encyclopedias, for example, make no mention of Esperanto literature at all – even though it manifestly exists (see however Tonkin 1993). Duličenko (1988) has pointed out that Esperanto offers a unique model for linguistic research, but it is frequently omitted from linguistic surveys and almost never used as such a model. A major problem in this regard, as Edwards (1986) has pointed out, is that knowledge of Esperanto tends to disqualify the researcher from studying it: to know Esperanto is to be regarded as an enthusiast, and hence biased; not to know it obviously disqualifies the researcher from writing about it (or ought to: there are some notorious exceptions). Hence the opportunities for outsiders to get to know the language and its community well are severely restricted. Such ignorance in turn weakens the claims of Esperanto speakers – for example about the extent of the Esperanto movement, the efficacy of the language, or its role in international life – because they cannot be verified through the testimony of reliably objective scholars.

Nonetheless the situation has improved considerably. When in 1976 Tonkin published the brief essay *An Introduction to Esperanto Studies* and in 1977 the third edition of his bibliography *Esperanto and International Language Problems*, he had occasion to refer to numerous major gaps in Esperanto studies: the lack of many basic research tools, the absence of adequate grammatical descriptions of the language, the absence of good etymological work. While many of these problems remain, the situation in the mid-1990s shows a marked improvement over the situation at the end of the 1970s. In fact there has taken place a positive flowering of Esperanto studies in various parts of the world (Schubert 1989c; Wood 1982; Tonkin 1987).

3. Trends in an expanding field

This expanded interest is due above all to two factors: the growth in academic respectability of Esperanto studies, especially in Eastern and Central Europe, and the interest in Esperanto as a possible aid or model in the machine translation of languages. Other stimulants to the linguistic study of Esperanto have come from within the community itself, particularly experiments in pedagogy, needs for specific linguistic tools, or internal controversies. Increasingly important in recent years have been technological advances, particularly computer networking and the emergence of low-cost publishing possibilities, which have made the exchange of data and ideas much easier.

Although Esperanto cannot claim to have attained mainstream status in East and Central European universities, research on the language, particularly among younger academics, became relatively widespread in the 1970s and 1980s. With opportunities for personal communication abroad severely limited, Esperanto offered a means of establishing foreign contacts for many young Eastern Europeans. These same young people in turn brought Esperanto into the academic setting in increasing numbers. In Hungary, an important Department of Esperanto has functioned since 1966 in the University of Budapest; while the primary focus has been on the preparation of teachers of the language, the Department has also served as a center for general interlinguistics, particularly under its founder and long-time director István Szerdahelyi (cf. Szerdahelyi 1980). In Poland, the Catholic University of Lublin possesses a major research library and has long been a center for Esperanto studies (Wojtakowski 1979), while the Polish Student Esperanto Committee organized annual conferences of high quality on Esperanto linguistics and sociology for most of the 1970s and 1980s, publishing the proceedings in the series *Acta Interlinguistica*. All of the other Central European countries have seen similar activities, albeit of a more sporadic nature, resulting in valuable collections such as those edited by Leyk 1985, Blanke 1986, and Čolić 1988. While such activity has diminished in the recent wave of economic and political change, the strength and depth of this intellectual tradition make a resurgence in the longer term seem likely.

The Soviet Union, particularly Russia, played an important role in the early development of interlinguistics, until both that intellectual tradition and the

Esperanto movement itself became targets of Stalinist repression. Following Stalin's death the field gradually expanded again, in part under the aegis of the Interlinguistics Section of the Soviet Academy of Sciences headed by Mahomet Isaev. Today classic works by scholars such as Ernest Drezen have been reissued (Drezen 1991, 1992), and interest in Esperanto is evident in several universities. Particularly active are Aleksandr Dulićenko, the long-time editor of the journal *Interlinguistica Tartuensis*, who has authored a bibliography of Soviet interlinguistics (1983) and the most extensive catalog of international auxiliary language projects (1990); and Sergej Kuznecov, whose study of the theoretical foundations of interlinguistics (1987) is indicative of a larger body of work.

In the academic circles of Western Europe, Esperanto continues to be viewed in a more marginal light, and much of the best work has been carried out by scholars working alone. A trend toward greater intensity and higher quality is suggested by the appearance of several important collective works in recent years (Duc Goninaz 1987; Mattos 1987b; Universidad de La Laguna 1987; Maitzen et al. 1994). A sustained research tradition has been established in the Institute of Cybernetics at the University of Paderborn, Germany, which has carried out research on the educational effects of Esperanto over a twenty-year period (Frank 1993), while the offering of courses at various universities in France, Austria and elsewhere, has also had its effect (cf. Symoens 1989).

However, it is the contribution of machine translation that has had the most far-reaching impact on Esperanto studies in Western Europe. The Distributed Language Translation (DLT) project conducted from 1983 to 1990 by the Dutch software firm BSO, in which Esperanto was used as an intermediary language, led to renewed interest, this time by proven professionals, in such issues as syntax, word-formation, and semantics in Esperanto. Not only did DLT staff members themselves contribute (Witkam 1983; Papegaaij 1986; Schubert 1987, 1993; Sadler 1991), but they in turn stimulated renewed scholarly interest elsewhere (e.g. Maas 1991). This impact of DLT is perhaps best illustrated by Schubert's edited volume, published by Mouton de Gruyter, entitled *Interlinguistics: Aspects of the Science of Planned Languages* (1989a). Contributors to the volume, which carries a preface by André Martinet, were drawn from Germany, the Soviet Union, France, USA, Switzerland, Belgium, India, Britain, and Canada. DLT was also responsible in part for the increased interest in the development of scientific and specialized terminology in Esperanto – an area of study that began with Eugen Wüster's notion, back in 1931, of using Esperanto as a

basis for the international standardization of terminology, but which is now largely concerned with expanding Esperanto's range of practical applicability (W. Blanke 1989). Whatever DLT's effects on the field of machine translation, the project contributed significantly to our understanding of the structures underlying Esperanto and of the problems in the way of its general application.

Another important development in Western Europe has been the increasing interest in the implications of Esperanto for theories of language acquisition. One line of research has sought to clarify the processes involved in learning Esperanto as a first language (Versteegh 1993, Corsetti 1993). Another has focused on the psychopedagogy of second-language learning (Piron 1986, Maxwell 1988), which may have important implications for Esperanto's potential role in classroom instruction, as well as clarifying psychological aspects of the opposition to Esperanto (Piron 1991, 1994). Other potentially fruitful fields of enquiry have been identified in a recent American survey (Fantini and Reagan 1993).

4. A base for further research

While academic interest in Esperanto studies has expanded, the production of basic research tools has also increased. Wells (1978) provided the beginning of a systematic description of Esperanto. The somewhat antiquated methodology of *Plena Analiza Gramatiko de Esperanto* (Kalocsay and Waringhien 1980) has been supplemented by modern descriptive techniques, both comprehensive (Jordan 1992, De Vleminck and Van Damme 1994, Bak 1994) and detailed (Yamasaki 1989, Moirand 1990). Waringhien (1987b) has provided a supplement to his *Plena Ilustrita Vortaro* (1970). Still in production is Ebbe Vilborg's meticulous *Etimologia Vortaro de Esperanto*, three volumes of which have now appeared (1989, 1991, 1993). Wood's guide (1982) to current work in the linguistics of Esperanto has been augmented by a bibliography of dissertations on Esperanto and interlinguistics, some two hundred in number (Symoens 1989). For the past ten years or so, Volume Three of the MLA Bibliography has included an extensive section on auxiliary and international languages – running to 337 items for 1988, for example. Additional items appear elsewhere in the bibliography, particularly in the literature volumes.

In Japan meanwhile, a gigantic project has been moving steadily forward.

Ito Kanji (ps. Ludovikito) has been collecting any and all material shedding light on the biography of Zamenhof and the early history of the language. Over thirty volumes have appeared so far. They include seven volumes of Zamenhof's literary translations and a new three-volume edition of Zamenhof's original works (Zamenhof 1989, 1990b, 1991b), replacing Dietterle's one-volume edition published in the 1920s. Ludovikito has now embarked upon a 12-volume set of most of the published works in Esperanto (primarily brochures and periodicals) prior to 1900. Rihej Nomura, also Japanese, has published the interesting *Zamenhofa Ekzemplaro* (1987), a reference work somewhere between a concordance and a dictionary of quotations, giving examples of Zamenhof's own use of Esperanto words and word roots. In another notable Japanese achievement, the lack of an international journal in Esperanto studies has partly compensated since 1992 by the bilingual *Japana Esperantologio*, edited by Seikô Yamasaki. The international newsletter *Informilo por Interlingvistoj*, now under the editorship of Detlev Blanke, continues to provide an important link between researchers.

Where, in all this activity, are the contributions of the United States situated? Even a cursory glance at the *MLA Bibliography* shows a dearth of activity on this side of the Atlantic (or the Pacific: we have noted some of Japan's and Korea's contributions, and activities in China are increasingly accessible to outside researchers). Besides individual contributions to the field from such scholars as Wood, Sherwood, Pool and Jordan, the most consistent commitment has come from the Center for Research and Documentation on World Language Problems, now linked with the University of Hartford. Among the Center's activities are its annual Conferences on Language and Communication, which include occasional items on Esperanto (Müller 1992); its involvement in the journal *Language Problems and Language Planning* (now published by John Benjamins in Amsterdam), including a special issue on Esperanto in 1987; and its role in stimulating a number of scholarly publications, notably a general introduction to Esperanto studies (Janton 1993) and a collection of papers situating Esperanto in the context of modern language research (Richmond 1993). The Center has been joined in this endeavor to build a North American research tradition by the Washington-based Esperantic Studies Foundation, whose newsletter *Esperantic Studies* provides an occasional window on current developments.

The major obstacle in the way of further progress, both in the United States and elsewhere, is simple ignorance of the scope and possibilities of Espe-

ranto research. Library collections are poor, knowledge of the language among scholars in relevant fields is slight or non-existent, and the resources for changing this situation are severely limited. But modern trends in linguistics would seem to favor the exploration of this unique linguistic and social phenomenon. As Pere Julià has pointed out in a particularly persuasive article (1989), formal theory must shift to accommodate empirical linguistic fact. There is a tendency in linguistics, he suggests, "to allow the formal techniques to dictate the conception of the subject matter rather than the other way round". But there are signs that this is changing. Perhaps this modest review will hasten the process.

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Humphrey Tonkin, now President of the University of Hartford, has been a leading figure in Esperanto studies for over two decades. As Director of the Center for Research and Documentation on World Language Problems, editor of the journal *Language Problems and Language Planning*, and senior author of the sections on international and auxiliary language in the MLA Bibliography, his efforts have been directed toward establishing bridges between indigenous traditions of Esperanto scholarship and researchers from other disciplines.

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